

Senior Service College Fellowship Civilian Research Project

BETWEEN THE GATES: INVESTIGATING CAREER DEVELOPMENT WHITE SPACE

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USAWC CIVILIAN RESEARCH PROJECT

**BETWEEN THE GATES: INVESTIGATING CAREER DEVELOPMENT WHITE
SPACE**

by

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Since 1947, the Army has periodically revised the officer management system in a continuing effort to optimize career development patterns. More changes are likely in the future, but the essential outline has held up through war and peace, expansion and drawdown. Most officers advance through a logical progression of training, unit assignments, professional military education, and other developmental positions in order to prepare for greater future responsibilities. The Army clearly articulates the prescriptive requirements in its career development guide which establishes a benchmark, or “gate”, for each grade and branch – a particular duty assignment, such as company command or program manager that must be satisfactorily completed before the officer is considered qualified for promotion to the next higher rank. Less clear is the value ascribed to “developmental and broadening” assignments. As a result of this ambiguity, officers all too frequently make short-term choices in the interests of their careers that are at odds with the long-term needs of the Army.

BETWEEN THE GATES: INVESTIGATING CAREER DEVELOPMENT WHITE SPACE

Since 1947, the Army has periodically revised the officer management system in a continuing effort to optimize career development patterns. More changes are likely in the future, but the essential outline has held up through war and peace, expansion and drawdown. Most officers advance through a logical progression of training, unit assignments, professional military education, and other developmental positions in order to prepare for greater future responsibilities. The Army clearly articulates the prescriptive requirements in its career development guide which establishes a benchmark, or “gate”, for each grade and branch – a particular duty assignment, such as company command or program manager that must be satisfactorily completed before the officer is considered qualified for promotion to the next higher rank. Less clear is the value ascribed to “developmental and broadening” assignments. As a result of this ambiguity, officers all too frequently make short-term choices in the interests of their careers that are at odds with the long-term needs of the Army.

Culturally, the Army breeds an institutional compulsion to fill “white space” or the discretionary time between daily, weekly or even monthly events. Anyone who has worn a uniform understands this practice intuitively. Similarly, the white space of an officer’s career has become nearly impossible to find. As we know from studying the careers of Eisenhower, Bradley and Marshall as well as present day senior officers, “discretionary time” used to exist. Where did it go? Most recent critiques of leader development conclude with a prescription for more additive requirements without carefully considering what should be taken away. But time is a zero sum game. If the

Army intends to expand the menu of developmental opportunities, especially experience, it must create the necessary time.

Key billets, such as platoon leader and command (company, battalion brigade), are the essential gates of officer development and form the bedrock of officer experience and advancement through the ranks. White space is then defined as the discretionary time between key billets, often outside of tactical units. White space assignments are largely a matter of requirements – someone has to fill them -, but who fills them can and does involve individual officer preference. The Army cannot send *everyone* to serve as a West Point professor, nor does it seek to man one organization at the expense of another. But given a set of choices, officers can and do help shape the direction of their career path. By limiting officer choice, the Army balances the demands of force structure with the professional development and education needs of all officers.

While on the surface it may appear that recent operational requirements are driving the reduction in white space opportunity, force structure, legislation and personnel management decisions also combine to limit what an officer who wishes to be competitive can experience. Twenty-five years after the Goldwater-Nichols Defense Reorganization Act and more than ten years after the Army implemented many of the recommendations contained in its Officer Personnel Management System XXI Final Report, the career patterns of mid-grade and senior officers are beginning to reflect dramatic change. Joint duty has become a central element of officer development. Functional areas, now single-track career paths, not only push selected officers through a more logical series of assignments, but also channel basic branch officers into a

narrower, more predictable path of longer operational assignments, with more time in key billets. By design, these altered courses of development provide officers with opportunities to accumulate deep expertise. They also serve to counter previous long-standing assertions that the Army creates jacks of all trades, but masters of none.

And yet, as recently as 2009, the Army Leader Development Strategy charges that “we are not building an adequate bench of senior leaders for the future.”¹ A growing professional military education (PME) backlog, inadequate personnel management policies, and failure to limit key billet time have variously been cited as the areas that require the greatest scrutiny and attention. As such, the strategy includes two leader development imperatives designed to guide policy including the goals of “achieving balance and predictability in personnel policies and professional military education in support of ARFORGEN” as well as the “preparation of select leaders for responsibility at the national level.”² The first may add more friction to an already policy-laden system and the second may add to a just-below-the-surface cynicism that personal relationships matter more than performance.

THE CHALLENGE OF BROADENING

This study investigates the career patterns of the most successful officers over the past fifty years. The data included the assignments, commissioning sources, educational background and developmental assignments of more than 150 general officers separated into three cohorts: General officers commissioned in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s.³ One of our aims was to discern similarities and differences in career

development patterns in order to advance the discussion of officer experience as a central pillar of leader development.

The veiled dissatisfaction with the current officer development system has lately been reflected by calls to “broaden” the officer corps.⁴ The former Chief of Staff of the Army has promoted the use of this term in talks and discussions with leaders throughout the force, implying but never outright stating that the officer corps is creating narrow, one-dimensional leaders. The Army’s officer career management guide uses variations of the term “broad” 397 times. As defined by DA Pamphlet 600-3, broadening includes:

...experiences outside the officer’s core branch or functional area competencies. ...Broadening assignments develop a wider range of knowledge and skills, augment understanding of the full spectrum of Army missions, promote practical application of language training or increase cross cultural exposure, and expand officer awareness of other governmental agencies, units or environments.⁵

Further, the need for broadening has also taken on new urgency after nearly a decade of continuous combat. The operating environment is arguably more complex and ambiguous than it was during the Cold War and its immediate aftermath. Young officers must make decisions that require careful consideration not only of the tactical situation, but the political, economic and social effects of both action and inaction. As stated by the former Training and Doctrine Command commander, GEN Martin Dempsey, “the most important adaptations will be in how we develop the next generation of leaders who must be prepared to learn and change faster than their future adversaries.”⁶

The imperative to adapt will be all the more difficult because the career patterns of the Army's basic branch officers are more remarkable for their similarities than differences. Professional military education patterns are likewise similar. Some pattern differences emerge in the white space, which reflects a combination of personal preference and requirements. But young officers making decisions about their future, most of whom have deployed two, three or more times, take careful note of the promotion, school and command opportunities conferred upon those who have gone before them. The "preferred" path, as established by the Army's selection boards, not only reveals diminishing white space experience, but importantly the *value* which the Army ascribes to that experience.

In today's Army, officers pulled out of the field for higher level staff positions in key roles may, in fact, be penalized for missing a troop deployment. Few seek to be away from the field for too long. The real consequence of the evolving pattern of career development is the diminishing value that officers - and the Army - place on non-tactical, broadening or white space experience. With the exception of joint duty, which is mandated by law, nearly every measure of weight given to troop duty has increased over the past 30 years while that given to, developmental experience inside of white space, where broadening ostensibly occurs, has declined drastically.

The obstacles to broadening then, include not only the reduction in white space for officer development, but also the diminished value assigned to broadening experience through promotion, selection and assignment processes. Without both - space and value - the Army's ongoing efforts to calibrate the evolving skills and background required for future success may come up short.⁷

INVESTIGATING WHITE SPACE

We track the encroachment on white space back to the officer personnel management reforms of 1972. In order to improve the officer management system, the Army centralized lieutenant colonel and colonel level command selection and established fixed tour lengths for both battalion and brigade command.⁸ By defining the objective of the career development path in concrete terms, the Army also assigned a de facto value to the steps leading to higher level command. The Army selected good company commanders for attendance at Command and General Staff College (CGSC). Units sought, and even competed for, recent staff college graduates to serve as operations officers and executive officers (S3/XO). Selection boards chose the best S3/XOs for battalion level command. Superior performance has always been important to success, but over time, key billets may have become the only billets that matter.

We can make three observations about our general officer cohorts. First, for the better part of 30 years, battalion and brigade key billet time was immune from the market based fluctuations of company command and S3/XO key billets which were (and are) dictated by officer inventory (supply) and force structure (demand). The number of battalion commands is finite. The selection process effectively limits the continued ascension of some officers while ensuring that those with the greatest potential have the opportunity to serve for a period of time which is both operationally practical and developmentally rewarding.

U.S. Army General Officer Key Billet Time

Key Billet	<i>Average time served by cohort (months)</i>		
	1960s	1970s	1980s
Company Command	14.3	18.8	21.8
S3/XO	15.5	24.5	21.0
Battalion Command	24.2	24.9	25.2
Brigade Command	24.4	24.6	28.0

Also noteworthy in our investigation is the fact that 1960s cohort officers entered battalion command, on average, at 15.4 years of service compared with 17.0 and 16.7 years of service for our 1970s and 1980s cohorts respectively. Between the completion of battalion command and the start of brigade command, many 1960s cohort officers were able to complete a full white space assignment (sometimes two) and senior service college.. And while 1970s officers assumed battalion command later than cohorts in the 1960s and 1980s, the relative stability of the security environment may have masked the difficulties of white space alignment.

Second, average company command and S3/XO key billet times vary considerably, but generally indicates an upward trend. The mobilization and expansion of the officer corps in the 1960s may have limited company command opportunity for the 1960s cohort. Likewise, the post-Cold War drawdown and the Army's inability to shed personnel as quickly as force structure may have limited S3/XO time for the 1980s cohort. Nevertheless, through the selection and continued ascension of officers with

greater company grade and field grade experience over time, the Army reinforced its attendant value to leader development.

Third, the significant increase in brigade command key billet time for the 1980s cohort can be attributed to the Army’s current unit rotation policy (vs. individual replacement) and the force generation model (ARFORGEN).⁹ While the policies that define the length of a command tour remain in effect, the remainder of the 1980s cohort and the 1990s cohort of battalion commanders will likely continue to exceed the remarkably stable historical average key billet time for battalion and brigade command. Although the recent “bump” in brigade command key billet time is the most obvious example of white space encroachment at the senior field grade level, we cannot conclude that operational requirements over the past ten years mark the beginning of a significant shift in developmental white space. In fact, the first noticeable shift occurred in the 1970s.

White space assignments, company grade (2LT-CPT)

Top 5 Most frequently observed

1960s	1970s	1980s
Branch School Instructor	No Assignment	No Assignment
ROTC Instructor	USMA Instructor	Branch School Instructor
USMA Instructor	Assignment Officer	Combat Training Center
Assignment Officer	Branch School Instructor	Assignment Officer
USMA Tactical Officer	USMA Tactical Officer	USMA Tactical Officer

When thinking about the evolution of career development, we have a tendency to point to officers who defied “the odds” and “took a different path” when searching for evidence that the present-day system is out of step with future requirements. But the essential features of today’s system have been in place for more than 40 years. It should be no surprise then that beginning with the 1970s cohort, officers began to shun white space assignments in favor of remaining in tactical units with troops. While it is true that most officers completed at least one company grade white space assignment, future general officers sought to remain in tactical units for extended periods with increasing regularity, and apparent success.

Several trends are not apparent simply from looking at the most frequently observed patterns above. First, for the 1960s cohort, 71% of officers participated in some form of fully funded graduate education program. Some earned their degree in conjunction with a USMA or ROTC assignment while others attended school for two years prior to returning back to troop duty or another assignment. Observations of fully funded graduate education dropped in the 1970s cohort to 31% and then again to 26% for the 1980s cohort.

Next, nearly half of all 1980s cohort officers did not have a white space assignment outside of a tactical unit. Of those who did, most pursued assignments which were shorter in length and more directly related to their immediate past or future troop experience at the tactical level (i.e. branch school instructor, combat training center observer controller). The decline in USMA Instructors provides an example of the sharp decline in longer white space assignments. Fully 25% of the 1960s general officer cohort served as Academy instructors compared with 10.5% and 5.8% for the 1970s

and 1980s cohorts respectively. Together, these trends suggest that both the opportunity and value ascribed to graduate education *by the Army* decreased while the importance of developing branch expertise and tactical competency increased.

When considering the most frequently observed white space assignments for field grade officers, the trend is decidedly “joint.” The Goldwater-Nichols Defense Reorganization Act of 1986 fundamentally altered the career of every officer on the path to flag officer rank by stipulating that “an officer may not be selected for promotion to the grade of brigadier general...unless the officer has served in a joint duty assignment.”¹⁰ As a result, *joint duty has become the most frequently observed white space assignment for high potential field grade officers.*¹¹ More than 90% of all 1980s cohort officers served in a joint billet prior to promotion to brigadier general. Further, officers who are “in the hunt” pursue joint opportunity to the exclusion of most other assignments and most do not serve for a full 36 month tour due to time constraints (usually driven by command). To do otherwise may jeopardize their continued ascension.

The creation of joint billets necessarily limited opportunities in other areas, to include tactical units as well as the Army Staff - the most frequently observed assignment for the 1960s cohort. Perhaps this is why critics of the current officer development system have proposed the establishment of a separate Service dedicated to joint duty. In the February 2010 CNAS report entitled *Keeping The Edge: Revitalizing America’s Military Officer Corps*, Don Snider calls for the establishment of a cadre of officers dedicated to service as joint specialists within the combatant commands and other departments and agencies. His assertion that “these entities are still formed by

“pick-up teams” of officers assigned for roughly two-and-a-half years before returning to their Service” is on the mark. Most officers who are eventually selected for general officer go on to serve in a series of operational or institutional Army assignments. Very few perform successive assignments in joint commands.¹² Further, the net effect of steering *all* of the very best officers away from their Services at one of the only points where white space is available, may detract from the Service’s ability to grow and develop deep and sustained competencies such as training, education and force management to name a few.

White space assignments, field grade (MAJ-COL)

Top 5 Most frequently observed

1960s	1970s	1980s
Army Staff	XO to General Officer	The Joint Staff
XO to General Officer	The Joint Staff	XO to General Officer
Assignment Officer	TRADOC	Combatant Command
Service School Instructor	Army Staff	Joint
Branch School Instructor	Combatant Command	Combat Training Center

As a result of concerns about the inability to develop functional experts, the Army opted for specialization in 1998. The new system enabled officers to pursue a functional specialty, in which they would compete for selection and promotion while optimizing the basic branch or operations career field in line with force structure requirements. At the time, this approach made perfect sense. The OPMS XXI report cited field grade

rotational turbulence as a significant hindrance to officer development. As noted in the OPMS XXI Final Report:

As the time-in-grade period for majors has shortened, the branch-qualified major has only a few months to spare after passing through the number and variety of wickets a successful officer must pass through at that grade. Officers' expectations and concerns about their careers continue to be expressed in a variety of ways, including...an inordinate degree of worry about future assignments, and anxiety about career security and about the opportunity to continue pursuing a successful career.¹³

These sentiments are consistent with later reports which continued to reflect worries that officers were less prepared for warfighting than their predecessors in spite of greater average time in key billet assignments as company grade and field grade officers.¹⁴

If the Army's primary intent for the OPMS XXI single track system was to create experts at the field grade level, an unintended consequence may have been an associated reduction in the variety of white space opportunities for basic branch officers. Further, the report assumed that the Army would limit the career path of some officers with deep operational experience. In other words, in order to promote more officers with certain niche expertise such as operations research or systems automation, the Army necessarily limited the promotion opportunity for officers with strictly operational experience. By broadening the experience base of officer cohorts, the Army has limited the upward mobility of officers without *exclusive* deep operational experience and narrowed the boundaries of individual development.

While our study did not consider the career paths of officers in the 1990 or 2000 cohorts (they have not yet been selected for general officer), it is clear that requirements to fill units rotating to Iraq and Afghanistan have strained the Army's ability to meet

basic branch field grade officer requirements. In short, fewer officers are serving at the tactical level, but all are serving for longer periods of time. Considering the careers of our three cohorts, it is evident that very few served in functional assignments and further, that the changes brought about by the OPMS XXI reforms of 1998 did not affect the officers of the 1960s and 1970s cohorts. However, with the establishment of functional career fields, the number of combat arms officers selected for brigadier general has steadily declined over the past 10 years. Further, the percentage of combat arms officers selected as a total of all active duty Army brigadier generals has declined from 69% in 2000 to 45% in 2010.

Brigadier general selections, combat arms vs. functional areas, 2000-2010			
	Functional Area	Combat Arms	
	Number selected	Number selected	% of all BG selected
2000	1	27	69
2001	0	27	68
2002	2	26	68
2003	1	25	63
2004	2	20	54
2005	0	19	61
2006	2	18	49
2007	2	24	63
2008	5	18	45
2009	3	20	54
2010	7	20	45

With the decline in the number and proportion of combat arms officers selected for promotion to brigadier general, the Army should expect to see officers and selection boards place *even greater emphasis* on field grade key billet time and muddy boots assignments. There may be a tendency to attribute a continued uptick in field grade key billet time to operating tempo and force structure demand, but it is far more likely that the growing emphasis on tactical expertise is a result of a personnel management

system that limits and devalues white space by design. Further, while some will view this as an indicator that specialization initiatives are beginning to succeed, greater selection precision will be required in order to ensure entry level general officers possess the requisite background and skills for continued ascension as strategic level leaders.

CONCLUSION

The Army's professional development guide for officers states that "the path of assignments or educational requirements that will guarantee success" is not prescriptive, "but rather describes the full spectrum of developmental opportunities an officer can expect for a successful career."¹⁵ But later chapters of the same Department of the Army Pamphlet reinforce the widely held belief concerning the importance of troop and key billet assignments: "The key assignment for a...captain is successful service as a company commander. There is no substitute for an operating force company command."¹⁶ Few will argue that the foundation for successive operational assignments should not be based on successful completion of key assignments at lower levels. However, officer ascension appears to be increasingly reliant on key billet time (and performance) as a significant determinant.¹⁷

This sentiment is seemingly at odds with the Army's approach dating back to the post-World War II era. The Army's Career Planning Program sought to develop the skills and abilities of individual officers according to their potential. The ultimate purpose of defining officer career patterns, and limiting the length of time each officer served in certain billets, was to ensure each officer was able to attain "broad professional

qualification” in preparation for duties that were well beyond the horizon.¹⁸ But officer development is no longer incidental to the larger purpose of future requirements. Instead, its de facto purpose is near-continuous operational employment.

The obstacles to broadening and education initiatives are not insurmountable. But now, the combined effects of change have caught up with the current generation of officers, and at the same time the demands of ARFORGEN rotations have brought the problem of white space into sharp focus. The Army faces a complicated choice between two approaches to officer development. The first approach is to develop leaders steeped in tactical experience, limit white space opportunity, and assign little value to non-tactical assignments. The second seeks balance between essential core competencies, creates time and assigns value to positions which reflect institutional commitment to leader development that looks beyond the next gate.

Endnotes

¹ Department of the Army, *Army Leader Development Strategy*. (Ft. Leavenworth: Combined Arms Center, 2009), 14.

² Ibid, 11.

³ The study focuses on the ascension of strategic leaders. Because the Army has predominantly advanced officers from combat arms branches (infantry, armor, field artillery, air defense, aviation and special forces), our sample only includes combat arms officers (60 commissioned in the 1960s, 38 in the 1970s and 69 in the 1980s).

⁴ Numerous articles and studies have sounded the alarm that the best officers are leaving the service at higher than normal rates, advanced education opportunities for junior officers are drying up and mid-grade officers may not be sufficiently prepared to assume the mantle of leadership held by the Army’s current senior officers.

⁵ Department of the Army. *DA Pamphlet 600-3 Commissioned Officer Professional Development and Career Management*, (Washington, D.C.: Headquarters, Department of the Army, 2010), 15.

⁶ Martin Dempsey, “Leader Development” in *ARMY Magazine*, Vol 61, No. 2 (Arlington: Association of the United States Army, 2011)

⁷ Harry Leonard et al. "Something Old, Something New: Army Leader Development in a Dynamic Environment." (Santa Monica: RAND, 2006). The report cites specific operational experience, intellectual and cognitive ability, breadth of knowledge and perspective. Many would argue that the officer corps is hitting the mark in terms of operational experience, but losing ground in the development of critical thinking skills and missing the target completely in terms of expanding "knowledge and appreciation of nonmilitary and non-U.S. environments and institutions."

⁸ Centralization also served to counter what was perceived to be the widespread practice of ticket-punching (short duration assignments in key billets, especially command)

⁹ Most 1980s cohort officers served as brigade commanders in Iraq or Afghanistan

¹⁰ Goldwater Nichols Defense Reorganization Act of 1986, Public Law 99-433, 10 U.S.C. § 404.

¹¹ While joint duty is undoubtedly a developmental white space assignment, the current practice of awarding joint credit for duty outside of designated joint billets is akin to ticket punching and probably dilutes the intent of the requirement.

¹² Don Snider, "Developing a Corps of Professionals," in *Keeping the Edge: Revitalizing America's Military Officer Corps*. (Washington, D.C.: Center for a New American Security, 2010).

¹³ Officer Personnel Management System (OPMS) XXI Task Force, "OPMS XXI Final Report" (prepared for the Chief of Staff of the Army, Washington, D.C., 9 July 1997)

¹⁴ Maren Leed, "*Keeping the Warfighting Edge: An Empirical Analysis of Army Officers' Tactical Expertise*," (Santa Monica: RAND, 2002).

¹⁵ Department of the Army, *DA Pamphlet 600-3*, 1.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 58.

¹⁷ Some would argue that key billet time is emerging as the sole determinant of promotion and selection for command. Further analysis, including a review of officer evaluation report information is required to adequately assess this question.

¹⁸ The Military Service Publishing Co., *The Officers Guide*. (Harrisburg: The Telegraph Press, 1950), 265.